

ASPECTS OF TIV CULTURE AND ITS RELEVANCE TO CONTEMPORARY THEATRE PRACTICE IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This paper seeks to highlight salient aspects of Tiv culture which are relevant to contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria. These include music and dance, mode of dress, religion, language, marriage and family system. Others are economy, leadership and politics, arts and literature, facial marks and tattoos, as well as architecture. The paper establishes the fact that culture and theatre operate in *pari-passu*. Since culture and theatre must function together to produce a better result, we conclude that, there should be a cultural rejuvenation so as to bring about an improvement in contemporary theatre practice not only in Tiv land, but Nigeria as a whole.

Key Words: Tiv Culture, Cultural Relevance, Cultural Rejuvenation, Theatre Practice, Contemporary Theatre

Introduction

The motivation to write this paper is borne out of mushrooming criticism of most people, including the educated elites on the relevance of culture to theatre practice in a given society such as ours, in spite of the fact that most, if not all people speak different languages, listen to and appreciate traditional music of different tribes, worship traditional religion, adopt a particular mode of dress, tribal marks and types of food. One detractor once queries where on earth the concept of culture fits in with that of theatre. Little did he realize that culture and theatre are two sides of a coin. Certainly, culture and theatre must work together.

Every society, through time, evolves and nurtures certain beliefs, norms, customs, values and practices which form the basis of what is characterized as culture. In view of the diversity of its application, the concept of culture is quite elusive and does not lend itself to a simple and single definition. But practically, at least in the anthropological sense, certain aspects of people's way of life such as language, religion, political and social systems, economy, aesthetics, mysticisms, dance, music, mode of dress, just to mention but a few can be seen to collectively constitute culture and these aspects are closely linked with the theatre. This paper, therefore, takes a critical look at some of the aspects of Tiv culture as it relates to contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria.

Defining Culture

Culture is the learned behavior of members of a given social group. Many writers and thinkers have offered interesting expansion of this definition. Some of these definitions are in line with anthropological point of view, while others are from the performing arts critic point of view. The fact to mention here is that, definitions of culture, whether from the anthropological or performative point of view abound. Let us take a close look at some of the definitions.

According to Chamber's Universal Learner's Dictionary, (2009) culture can be defined as educated taste in art, literature, music and dance. Emmanuel Arinze (1983) in his words states that:

When man lives in a group, he and the group develop a culture which is a patterned way of doing things that will include his belief system, family system, modes, language, religion, food, mode of dress and music. Furthermore, his creative works, architecture and his technology form part of his culture (154).

Culture is the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, feeling and acting (Harris, 5). In his view, Rosaldo (1989) opines that culture lends significance to human experience by selecting from and organizing it. It refers broadly to the forms through which people make sense of their lives, rather than more narrowly to the opera or art of museums" (26). To E.T Hall (1976) culture is the medium evolved by humans to survive. Nothing is free from cultural influences. It is the keystone in civilization's arch and is the medium through which all of life's events must flow (14). While C. Geertz cited in Taylor, (1991, P.91) avers that culture is an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbolic forms by means of which (people)

communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes towards life. Okpaga notes that culture is the whole range of human activities which are created and learned and are transmitted from generation to generation through various learning processes (60-72). Virtually all definitions of culture stated above recognize the fact that culture is learned.

However, Amadi (1981) contends that, culture is the totality of the way of life evolved by people in its environment like the social, political, economic, aesthetic and religious norms and mode of organization which together distinguish a people from its neighbor (60-61). Ikenga, -metuh and Ojoade defined it as the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society (2). Thus, in an attempt to find a maximal definition of the term that will fall within the context of this paper, culture is conceived as phenomenon which is common to all mankind as it is the inspiration and life-blood of every human community, which gives it its identity, maintains its historical continuity and provides the basis for the future especially in terms of theatre practice. In other words, culture is the world made meaningful; it is socially constructed, and maintained through communication between the actors and audience. Each culture serves a purpose. It limits as well as liberates us; it differentiates as well as unites us. It defines our realities and thereby shapes the ways we think, feel and act. It helps us categorize and classify our experiences; it helps define us, our world, and our place in it. Culture has dignity and value which must be respected and preserved, and in that sense it is a misnomer to describe one culture as primitive, and the other as civilized.

In the light of the above stated our framework for this essay becomes clearer. It is apparent to state here that, culture must be identified with a society, ethnicity or tribe. I do not intend to be too expansive in our discussion, but rather we shall be limiting ourselves to the Tiv culture.

Brief History of the Tiv People

In a nutshell, the Tiv are the sixth largest tribe in Nigeria (2006 Nigerian Census). They constitute about 72 percent of the total population of Benue State with 14 out of 23 Local Government Councils. The Tiv also have territorial spread across the boundaries such as Taraba, Nassarawa, and Cross River states. They occupy the central part of Nigeria popularly referred to as "Middle Belt". This area extends roughly between latitudes 6 degrees, 8 degrees to 10 degrees East longitude respectively. The Tiv people are mostly peasant farmers whose chief means of subsistence is agriculture. They also have their traditional religion and rich cultures that reflect on their way of life as a people. Below are some of the aspects of Tiv culture that are outstanding and need to be discussed here.

Aspects of Tiv Culture

Having acquainted ourselves with the Tiv background, let us at this juncture proceed to discuss certain aspects of the Tiv culture. Worth discussing here are:

Music and Dance

Just like other cultures, music and dance are very vital in Tiv culture. The two cannot be separated. There are many forms of music in Tiv land: religious music, festival music, burial music, marriage music among others. Similarly, dance performances are of different kinds. There are dances for funeral occasion, for instance *Girinya*. There are dances for marriage ceremonies; there are dances that record historical events; there are also dances that are specially choreographed for special ceremonial occasion like the society wedding called *Ivom*, and the attainment of nobility or *Shagba*. There also exist ritual dances like the *Ibamegh* and the *Igbe* (Gbilekaa 1993. 42). The Marriage dance is such that a man wishing to marry is expected to commission a dance in respect of his bride. Till date the Tiv employ music, dance and song to celebrate various occasions.

Mode of Dress

The Tiv culture provides a distinct and unique mode of dress for elders, mothers, sons and daughters of the land. Some clothes that are worn as part of Tiv traditional dress include *Anger*, which is designed in black and white streak and *Akpen* which is designed in blue and black colour, *Ivavityo* which is designed brownish in colour. The style of sewing for the men is in form of *Danshiki* (garment). Sometimes, it is not sewn; it can be covered on the body with part of the chest being bare, with the cap of the same material. As for the women and ladies, it is tied on their waist and top worn to cover the chest with a piece tied on their heads. On festive or

ceremonious days, the Tiv culture demands that every sons and daughters irrespective of where he/she comes from should appear in the traditional dress. The Tiv mode of dress is so fascinating that other tribes in Nigeria are now adopting it for use either as normal dress or costumes for theatrical performances.

Religion

The Tiv people have a religion which is different from that of European or Western concept. Tiv traditional religion pivots on a trio: *Tsav*, *Azov* and *Akombo*. *Tsav* is the exceptional powers possessed by human beings. The potency of this power is seen in man's ability to control other supernatural forces that are capable of causing sickness and death. *Azov* are spirits who are considered counterparts of man. They cannot be seen by ordinary human eyes. They inhabit the same environment with man and carry out activities that human beings carry out. Their main functions are to tame the excesses of *Mbatsav* (witches). While *Akombo* are magical emblems and forces that have no spirit associated with them but are human forces that form a natural part of Tiv environment. The idea surrounding *Akombo* is that, it is an evil that can attack man or property and this evil must be controlled through magical means.

Language

A critical survey of the Nigerian nation would prove to us the uniqueness of the Tiv people in terms of language. Despite the largeness in population, they speak a common language. No amount of interaction with neighboring tribes such as Hausa, Idoma, Jukum, Eggon, Udam, Igala, and Kuteb among others has infiltrated the language and communication of the Tiv.

Marriage and Family System

Before the intervention of European in the Nigerian political setting, of which Benue state and Tiv land is part and parcel, marriages in Tiv land were done traditionally. The earliest system of marriage that was in practice in Tiv land was called *Yam Ishe*, meaning exchange which was equivalent to trade by barter in which a young man seeking for a girl to marry had to look for another person having the same purpose to exchange sisters and these sisters turned up to be wives for both of them. The *Yam Ishe* was without challenges, in that, men that were born without sisters ever remained bachelors. *Yam Ishe* was later replaced with *Kem Kwase*, which is payment of bride price to the parents of the girl before marriage could take place. People who could not afford money to pay the bride price resulted to elopement while payment of bride price was expected to be paid later. On the other hand, family systems in Tiv land, traditionally allows polygamy as it is the only way of displaying how rich a person is (*Shagba or*) and also as a way of raising population to take care of the farms.

Economy

Economy in Tiv land is viewed on the basis of crops, animals, and plants production and marketing. The inscription which places Benue state as "Food Basket of the Nation" remains apparent in our memories. Several food crops such as yam, rice, beans, millet, cassava, sweet potato, groundnuts, maize, sorghum, ben seed, pepper, tomatoes, soya beans, peanut, among others are produced in Tiv land for both consumption and cash crops. economic trees such as orange, mangoes, cashew, guava, and banana are to also produced in large quantities for both consumptions as well as for marketing. The rearing of animals such as cows, goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, just to mention but a few for both consumption and for marketing is also much in practice. It is interesting to state here that, a Tiv man irrespective of his status, education and position in the society derives joy in farming as it is part of Tiv culture that has from time immemorial proven, to make food abundant in the land. Again, there are markets square all over Tivland where agricultural products can be sold. Market days are either counted four to five days, five to six days, while some have permanent days like every Mondays, Wednesday, and Saturdays. Market squares are the main avenues in Tivland where crops, goods and services can be exchanged for money or cowries or through trade by barter as it was done in the olden days.

Leadership and Politics

The Tiv people are divided into two broad groups: *Ichongo* and *Ipusu*. The two are further divided into smaller clans and lineages. Irrespective of where one came from, political leadership is under the authority of the *Tor Tiv* who is the paramount leader as well as loyal father of the entire Tiv race. The Tiv culture and curtesy demands that respect must be accorded

to *Tor Tiv* and others kings such as *Ter*, *Ityoor*, *Ortar*, and *Tor Kpande*. Cases of misconduct, land disputes, and other social upheavals must not be settled in courts, but with the kings and chiefs. The Tiv are generous and peaceful especially to strangers. They are ever willing to maintain good relationship with their neighboring tribes, but they could be cantankerous in a situation where one crosses their boundaries. It is a habit of a Tiv man or woman to remain noticed in the society.

Art and Literature

Tiv culture lays much emphasis in art and literature. The art of the Tiv people can be seen in performance, sculpture, molding, weaving and handiwork of different kind. It is apparent to state that, some grotesque figures that were carved for the *Kwagh-Hir* puppet shows in the early twentieth century are still extant. In the area of literature, the folkloric oral literature of the people, the riddles, proverbs, and wise saying have been transferred from generation to generation. Thus, we conclude that the Tiv art and literature are indeed rich.

Architecture

Architecture of the Tiv people, in this context, is the way and manner of erecting a building. The Tiv people have their own way of doing so; a house is raised with local bricks that are made without cement. Sometimes, these bricks are burnt to make it stronger. Another way of raising a house is the molding system. Before the introduction of iron sheets by the Europeans, bamboo and raffia were used to roof a house. In fact, to a Tiv man the traditional thatch house is the best apartment especially in terms of ventilation and it remains the best house one can think about for relaxation.

Facial Marks and Tattoos

Throughout history, the Tiv people have decorated their faces and bodies in some ways. Nearly all male and female adults and children in Tiv land, in the past, had facial marks and tattoos which served as decoration or tribal identity, or perhaps intended to provide magical protection. The act is still in practice in most communities in Tiv land, especially among the *Iharev* in Makurdi and Naka areas of Benue State. Facial marks and tattoos provide mark of identity and means of non-verbal communication among the Tiv people. Facial marks in Tiv land functions almost as a language that can indicate a person's age, gender, marital status, place of origin, religion, social status or occupation. When a Tiv man or woman wears facial marks, He/she may be communicating or giving the impression that he/she wants to look more traditionally handsome or beautiful. In Tiv culture, brides and grooms wear facial marks to celebrate the occasion of a marriage. In modern Tiv societies, tribal marks and tattoos is not so rigidly regulated and people have more freedom whether to have it or not.

Culture and Theatre

Culture and theatre are indeed intertwined. Culture defines our reality, and because culture is constructed and maintained through theatrical performances, it is in theatre that cultural power resides. And because theatrical performances are significant part of the modern world, more and more attention is being paid to the interaction between culture and theatre. Scholars and social critics have argued about the connection between culture and theatre beginning from the Greek times. The answers have always been overwhelmingly in support of the fact that culture and theatre are indeed related. For example, English theatre critic and writer, Kenneth Peacock Tynan in his book *Theatre Writings* (2008) said: "No theatre could sanely flourish until there was an umbilical connection between what was happening on the stage and what was happening in the cultural world".

Undoubtedly, culture is an aspect that plays significant role in theatre. For theatre to be relevant, it must have symbiotic relationship with culture. The culture we grow up in is part of us, what we do and the attitude we take will either confirm the way culture is or make changes in it. Theatre is a visible demonstration of outward realization of our culture. Theatre interprets cultural beliefs of the people, community or society. Throughout history, from ancient time through to the present, theatre has always been a reflection of the society's culture. This is so, especially if we cast our minds back to the Greek era during the worship of god Dionysus; the chanting of songs and ritual worships was part of the Greek culture. Therefore, out of all arts, theatre is the closest to culture. When an audience is viewing theatre, they watch all the relationships that exist in culture played out in front of them. Theatre is surrounded by culture.

Theatre is theatre because it is so relevant to culture. On this note, the title of our paper becomes significant. The question arising is, how relevant is Tiv culture to theatre practice in contemporary Nigeria?

Tiv Culture and Theatre Practice in Nigeria

Theatre practice in an artistic medium that promotes culture. In other words, theatre thrives on some positive aspects of culture. Ododo (2015) has stated in his book on *Facekuerade Theatre: A Performance Model from Ebira-Ekuechi* that in Africa, the search for authentic African theatre aesthetics is robust. This search resonates an inner code of African aesthetic value within the larger context of the world theatre cultures (ii). On the aspects of significant efforts on theory and work done so far in the area of theatre and culture, Ododo goes further to list Wole Soyinka's ritual theatre, the narrative theatre concept of Efua Sutherland; Iyorwuese Haghaer's the Tiv *Kwagh-Hir*, Sam Ukala's Folkism, as some notable examples. Also, there abound theorization on festive theatre among which are those of Ogunba (1978), Amankulor (1981), the total theatre of Joel Adedeji and Fabulist theatre aesthetics of Olu Obafemi (ii). It must be understood here that the relationship of culture and theatre cannot be doubted. Apparently, certain aspects of Tiv culture are applicable to contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria. These include first and foremost is the aspect of music and dance According to Adelugba in Obanya and Arinze's Cultural Heritage in Nigerian Education (1983), music and dance are some or the ways by which culture is disseminated within a generation and transmitted from generation to generation (114). In Tiv culture, drumming, singing, and sometimes clapping and stamping as well as dancing are necessary and inseparable. These activities put together are regarded as performance. The incidence of this broad activity in the lives of Tiv is very high indeed. It is pertinent to state that hardly any theatrical performance in Tiv land is presented without the incorporation of music and dance. In fact, most of the productions are mainly a fusion of music and dance. Examples of theatrical performances in Tiv land with a blending of different music and dance are *Swange*, *Ingough*, *Kpingi*, *Ajigbee*, and *Kwagh-Hir* among others. Over the years, these aspects of Tiv culture have transformed to theatre practice not only in Tiv land but Nigeria as a whole. In the 1980s the *Kwagh-Hir* performance, for instance was performed in several places abroad. This has provided a model for contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria.

Second, is the aspect of mode of dress Apparently, the Tiv traditional dress earlier mentioned; *Anger*, *Akpen*, *Ivavityo* and a host of others have been adopted as costumes for theatrical performances not only in Tiv land but other places in the country. Today, the National Troupe of Nigeria has adopted the Tiv *Anger* as one of the costumes for theatrical performances. This goes to show the relevance of the Tiv traditional dress in contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria.

Third, the aspect of language: Tiv is the language of communication among the Tiv people. However, the interesting aspect is that, today, some of the Tiv traditional songs are being used for theatrical performance beyond Tiv land. During a visit to National Theatre Iganmu-Lagos in 2014 The writer I was highly amazed at the way Tiv traditional songs were being sung by members of the National Troupe, who incidentally are now speaking Tiv people. This shows the impact of the Tiv culture in theatre practice at the national level.

Fourth, is the aspect of literature, art and craft. The folklore and oral literature of the Tiv people is fast becoming a thing of national interest. For instance, Suemo Chia's *Adem Wade Kohol Ga*, a novel based on Tiv proverbs and wise saying was recently translated into English and is being dramatized by the National Troupe of Nigeria as well as in many educational theatres across the country. Similarly, Tiv sculpture is widely used as props for theatrical performances like *Kwagh-Hir* beyond Tiv land.

Fifth, is the aspect of facial marks and tattoos. The traditional mark and tattoos normally given or designed on one's face and body has provided the basis for make-up in contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria.

Lastly, one significant area in which Tiv culture has made creative impact in contemporary theatre practice in Nigeria is cowries. Cowries are shell, formerly used as money in Tiv land. Since cowries are no longer accepted as legal tender in Tiv land, they are mainly used now as shakers (*Bibi*) dancers. They are fixed on a long twine and tied on the dancer's legs, so that by shaking of the legs or stamping of feet produces a unique and aesthetic sound, especially when it is done along with drums and songs. The use of *Bibi* by dancers is not restricted to the Tiv

dancers. It is adopted for use among other tribes like Yoruba, Igbos, Bini (Edo), Efik, Jukun, and Idoma.

Conclusion

In conclusion it is stated that culture is an integrative human phenomenon that cannot be separated from the theatre. Some aspects of Tiv culture are indeed relevant to contemporary theatre practice not only in Tiv land but Nigeria as whole. Culture and theatre, therefore must be given adequate attention they deserve. The more interest we give to cultural revival, the better it will be for the development of theatrical performance not only in Tiv land but Nigeria as a whole.

Recommendations

Based on the above conclusion, it is hereby recommended as follows:

- I. First and foremost, since culture and theatre cannot be separated within the Tiv setting, there is need for cultural revival, the past and the present so as to build a new viral future especially for the theatre that we can all be proud of.
- II. Arts theatres are avenues for theatrical performances as well as cultural showcasing.
- III. The Festival of Art and Culture (FESTAC) in 1977 did construct the National Arts Theatre in Lagos for theatrical performances generally in Nigeria. This was followed by the establishment of State Arts Councils in virtually all the states of the Nigerian Federation. Unfortunately, these theatres or centres are no longer functioning as expected. There is every need for the government, well-meaning individuals as well as theatre artists to put heads together to revive the Nation Arts theatre as well as state Arts Councils for the production of theatrical performances and cultural display.
- IV. Finally, positive direction should be given to cultural values. Doing so will bring about revolutionary change and radical reforms in theatre performance.

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